

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice On the Iraqi National Assembly Vote to Extend the Date for the Drafting of the Iraqi Constitution

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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(6:00 p.m. EDT)

SECRETARY RICE: Good evening. I have a brief statement and then I'll take a few questions.

Iraqis from across the political spectrum -- Sunni, Shia, Kurds and others -- are making substantial progress on their constitution, including on many of the most difficult issues before them. They have achieved a lot and they have generated considerable momentum toward the completion of their constitution. Iraq's leaders have asked for and received from their freely elected national assembly seven more days to finalize their work. This request was in full accordance with the Transitional Administrative Law, which provides the framework for this process. With the January elections, the formation of a new, inclusive government, the establishment of a constitutional process and now their work on a new constitution, Iraqis have continued to demonstrate their commitment to a new Iraq, based on the rule of law and their desire for a common future. We are witnessing democracy at work in Iraq. The new constitution will be the most important document in the history of the new Iraq. We are confident that they will complete this process and continue on the path toward elections for a permanent government at the end of the year.

Thank you and now I'll take a few questions.

Anne.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, it sounds as if the compromise document that emerged earlier today left out, really, all of the hardest questions facing the Iraqi drafters. Will a week's time be enough to resolve those? And what will the U.S. response be if, in fact, they end up deferring again?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, my understanding, Anne, is that they are working on a comprehensive document; that they have made substantial progress on all of the issues

before them. I'm not going to try to second guess or discuss what is going on in that process. I think that's for the Iraqis to do. But they are considering all of the difficult issues before them and they felt that they needed more time. We have to remember that this is an enormously important document and what you have here is people who are trying to build a common future after decades of tyranny. And so the opportunity to work together, to continue to work together, that's what they went to their assembly with and they got unanimous consent. And I might just mention that there were some 237 of the 275 assembly members were still there, waiting for this process. And so it's my understanding that they are continuing to work on all of the difficult issues and that they believe they need seven days or so to complete that work.

Nick.

QUESTION: Can you tell us what Ambassador Khalilzad is trying to do in the last few days? What issues was he focusing on? What issues does he plan to focus in the next week? And also, there have been suggestions that the Embassy got really involved after that -- Ambassador Khalilzad got to Baghdad and that perhaps his predecessor, Ambassador Negroponte, was too hands-off and wasn't helping the Iraqis as well as he could have. Would you tell us whether that might be true?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think that the United States has been very involved with the Iraqis every step of the way. But this is an Iraqi process; this is not an American process. And I know that Zal, as John Negroponte before him, tried to help in any way that they were asked to do. Sometimes they were asked to facilitate, to hold discussions, but I want to be very clear that this is an Iraqi process and I think you saw today that Iraqis are in control of this process. They decided that they were responsible officials who needed more time to look at the very difficult issues that were in the text. And so they took that time in accordance with a process that was set up. And so, yes, Zal has been active. Our people have been active. Others have been active in helping them, but this is by all means an Iraqi process.

Yeah. Joel.

QUESTION: Some of the people involved in Iraq are saying that if they cannot reach agreement within a week, then they will call for new elections, which is what the basic law says they must do. How will the United States feel about that and do you think new elections would perhaps with more involvement of more Iraqis would produce a government more likely to approve the kinds of things the United States is concerned about?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Joel, what struck me is that they didn't take that option, that in fact they -- those who are the drafters of the constitution, as well as the leadership, because you should know the leaders have been very involved in this process -- decided that they had made substantial progress, they made enough progress that what they wanted was a little more time. And so they availed themselves of this option to go to the

national assembly. Again, they got that unanimously. I believe they're going to finish this. I've heard expressions from the Iraqis that they believe that they're going to finish it. I don't think we really do any good by speculating beyond that because I think that they are very much focused on a course that will bring this to conclusion at the end of seven days.

I think we have to step back a little bit here and recognize that, yes, there was an August 15th deadline to complete the constitution; there was also a way for them to avail themselves of a few more days and this is a pretty important process, these people are working very, very hard. They've been working very long hours, but what that says is that they are really committed to putting together a document that they believe in, a document that can be a foundation for a free and democratic Iraq for all Iraqis, and that they're determined to do that. They didn't change the process, they didn't walk out of the process, they didn't try to go around the process as some of the news reporting suggested this morning. Instead, they have remained committed to a process to bring this together for all Iraqis and I think it's pretty impressive what they've achieved thus far.

Yes.

QUESTION: In the long term, does it concern you that the Kurds, for example, are still asking for the eventual right of secession? And also, especially as a woman, are you concerned that the questions over women's rights are still outstanding?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, on women's rights, I think we've been very clear that a modern Iraq will be an Iraq in which women are recognized as full and equal citizens and I have every confidence that that is how Iraqis feel. And the important phrasing in the constitution, how that will be represented, of course they're going to continue to work on. But the United States has been very clear about the importance of women's rights and the interesting thing is, of course, there have been a number of women's groups that have been bringing a lot of pressure for the full acknowledgement of women's rights. This is truly a democratic process.

Now, when it comes to various groups, including the Kurds, that have particular interests at stake, it's not surprising in a democratic process that people continue to press for certain outcomes, but ultimately, these documents are, by their very nature, documents that embody compromises. And they are continuing to work together and to work together until the 11th hour in the way that they have, suggests that they fully understand the importance of compromise.

MR. MCCORMACK: Last question.

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah. Peter.

QUESTION: Yeah, Madame Secretary, how confident are you that the Sunnis are being fully included in this process, since there had been some reports that maybe the Shiites

and Kurds were trying to ram through a solution?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think what this shows is that in fact they continue to hold together and they continue to pull together, using an established vehicle that was there for them to get a little bit more time. They didn't go around the process. They went to the national assembly, they got unanimous consent of the national assembly to continue their work. That suggests that that's how they want this process to work, not to go around some particular group.

I also, having been in Iraq just a couple of months ago, I think it's quite remarkable how much the process has become more inclusive over the last couple of months. Of course, the Sunnis did not fully participate in the elections for a number of reasons, were therefore not very represented in the transitional national assembly. They went out of their way, nonetheless, to have a government that was inclusive of Sunnis. They then went out of their way to have a constitutional process that was more inclusive of the Sunnis, a committee that was more inclusive of Sunnis than the original committee.

And now, the Sunnis seem to me to be very much a part of this process and I think that it is a very good sign that when it came to it today, when they -- as responsible officials, responsible elected officials believed that they needed a little more time, that they availed themselves of the vehicle that was there to go to the national assembly, ask that time -- President Talabani to say, we've made substantial progress, we'd like to have a little more time, that's the way that this process is working, it's working in an orderly fashion and I think the Iraqis have a lot to be proud of. They've got a lot of work to do, but this is really democracy at work in Iraq and given where they were just a few years ago, having lived in tyranny for all those decades, this is an extraordinary achievement for the Iraqi people.

Thank you very much.

QUESTION: One more?

SECRETARY RICE: Okay, Robin. (Laughter).

QUESTION: What role are you playing? Have you had any contact in the recent days or do you intend to have any contact with any Iraqis during this last critical week?

SECRETARY RICE: I've largely stayed in touch with Ambassador Khalilzad and also with the President a couple of times today and will continue to do that. Obviously, if my help is needed or anybody's help is needed, we'll do that. But this is an Iraqi process. This is a moment for the Iraqi people. And when they went into that assembly today and so many of them were still there and they got the vote unanimously to continue the process so that they could finish their work over the next seven days and they broke into applause, it says something about what they all have at stake and understand that have at stake on behalf of the Iraqi people.

Thank you.

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